*Michigan Rehabilitation Services*

# Communication Matters

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## Protests at Michigan School for the Deaf

During late November of 2005, Michigan newspapers reported on a hunger strike and protests at Michigan School for the Deaf (MSD). While actions of this nature are never simplistic, the stated concern of Ryan Commerson, the former MSD employee whose hunger strike drew press attention, is that MSD should adopt a Bilingual/Bicultural approach to educating deaf students. Proponents of the bilingual/bicultural approach contend that deaf children's reading levels (far below their hearing peers) would benefit from this approach. MSD has employed a Total Communication approach to education since 1986.

### The Deaf Education Debate

Approaches to deaf education have been emotion ridden for centuries. For many years, the debate raged between those who believed in a strictly oral approach and those who favored the use of manual communication or sign language. The Oral method emphasizes speech reading and the use of residual hearing for all communication. Proponents believe that allowing the deaf child to use sign language will discourage the development of oral forms of communication needed to participate in the hearing world. Those teaching a method of manual communication (there are several systems that have been developed for use in education) stress that the child will learn best who has easy access to visual communication.

### Total Communication

The Total Communication approach, used at MSD since the State Board of Education approved it in 1986, uses both verbal/auditory and manual communication, as well as any other communication approach that works for the child. The approach takes advantage of whatever residual hearing the child possesses while providing visual communication to fill in the gaps. Teachers in a Total Communication setting will often speak and sign simultaneously. Students will use hearing aids and assistive listening devices, if appropriate, to augment hearing.

The weakness of Total Communication, according to Bicultural/Bilingual proponents, is that it is not possible to speak clearly and fluently in both English and American Sign Language (ASL) at the same time, because each language has very different syntax and grammar. As a result, hearing teachers, who are not native signers, tend to speak in English and use a form of pidgin sign language along with their speech. Unless other culturally deaf adults are available to the child, he or she will not be immersed in true ASL.

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## Agency Changes and Updates

In recent months, there have been several important changes in agency names, addresses, etc. If you hear of other changes that should be passed along, please forward to Julie Eckhardt at jewel@chartermi.net.

**Self Help for Hard of Hearing People (SHHH)** has changed the name of the national organization. The new name is **Hearing Loss Association of America.** The web site remains:

www.hearingloss.org

**Michigan Association for Deaf, Hearing and Speech Services (MADHS)** is now called **Michigan Association for Deaf and Hard of Hearing (MADHH).** Web address:

www.madhs.org

There is a new e-mail address for **Deaf CAN**:

deafcan@deafcan.org

E-mail addresses of staff have changed also. The web address remains:

www.deafcan.org

## Hearing Loss Population Tops 31 Million in US

See the July 2005 issue of Hearing Loss Review at:

www.hearingreview.com

Information or news related to Deaf or Hard of Hearing services may be forwarded to Julie Eckhardt at **jewel@chartermi.net**. Views expressed in this bulletin are not necessarily the views of Michigan Department of Labor & Economic Growth-Rehabilitation Services. Communication Matters is available on the web at **www.michigan.gov/mr**s and on the E-Learn Deaf & Hard of Hearing Resource Center.

# Protests at MSD

### The Bilingual/Bicultural Approach

The Bilingual/Bicultural approach (sometimes called Bi-Bi) is grounded in the research that identifies American Sign Language as a complete and distinct language, unique from English or any other spoken language. Bi-Bi education recognizes the culture of Deaf citizens as any other cultural minority, not as a disabled group. The approach also recognizes that deaf children are often born into homes with hearing parents and siblings. As they become fluent in ASL, they become part of a culture (Deaf culture) that is different than that of their family of origin. Thus, with a bilingual and bicultural approach, the child is taught to function in two cultures and languages. Support is also provided to the family for learning ASL.

Research into all of the educational approaches described above has shown mixed results. What is clearly established is that pre-lingually deaf children (deafened before the acquisition of language) tend to have lower reading levels than their hearing peers. The other well established fact is that a large percentage of pre-lingually deaf adults, no matter which educational system they participate in, read at or below the 5th grade level. The exception is deaf children born into culturally deaf families. These children are exposed to ASL immediately after birth, and thus develop a complete and fluent language base on which to build other language competencies. These factors are fueling some of the controversy around deaf education as it is currently practiced.

### Michigan Department of Education Response

According to Jeremy Hughes, Deputy Superintendent of the Michigan Department of Education (in a memo dated 12/9/05), a referent group will be established to carefully study the Total Communication policy of MSD, review educational research, and consult with experts to determine the best educational approach for MSD's students.



# Bilingual/Bicultural Education

## ERIC Digest #E553


Authors: Sharon and Keith Baker
August 1997


During the last two decades bilingual-bicultural education programs (programs which recognize that children may come from a different culture and speak a different language in the home than in the school) have flourished in the United States as the ethnic composition of children attending public schools has become more diverse. In the late 1980's discussion of bilingual-bicultural education for children who are Deaf brought about new theories. (A capital D is used by bilingual-bicultural programs to identify deafness as a cultural, rather than a medical, issue. According to Schirmer (1994) "the impetus for implementing bilingual-bicultural programs for children who are deaf comes from two sources: (1) The Deaf community, who advocate for the right to pass on their language and culture to succeeding generations; (2) the overall disappointing achievement of youngsters who are deaf. (p. 98) Although small gains have been made in the levels of reading achieved by the average child who is deaf, overall achievement remains considerably lower compared to their hearing peers despite ardent attempts to teach Deaf children through Total Communication (see ERIC EC Digest E559) and oral approaches (see ERIC EC Digest E551).

Additional impetus for bilingual-bicultural programs comes from Sweden, where, in 1981, after years of grassroots activism by Deaf adults and parents of children who are Deaf, the Swedish Parliament passed a law stating that people who are Deaf need to be bilingual in order to function successfully in the family, school, and society (Mahshie, 1995).

### What Does it Mean to Be Bilingual-Bicultural?

"A person who is bicultural can move freely within and between two different cultures. Biculturalism implies an understanding of the mores, customs, practices, and expectations of members of a cultural group and the ability to adapt to their expectations" (Finnegan, 1992, p.1). Bilingualism involves the ability to use two different languages successfully. Some individuals may be stronger in one language, some in the other, some may blend the two languages into a pidgin (Maxwell, 1991). Individuals who are Deaf are considered bilingual if they are able to communicate effectively in both American Sign Language (ASL) and English or the spoken language of their country. They are considered bicultural if they are capable of functioning in both the Deaf community and the

majority culture.

Although there is no standardized formula defining bilingual-bicultural programs, they are founded on a common set of principles. A basic premise of bilingual-bicultural education is that all children should develop communicative competency. This is a challenge because more than 90 percent of children who are Deaf have hearing parents or caregivers who must learn ASL as a second language.

Education programs that follow the bilingual-bicultural philosophy work with parents/caregivers to help them realize the special linguistic, educational, and social needs of their child(ren) who are Deaf and to help them realize the importance of early language acquisition. Deaf children who develop language late are less proficient than those who develop an early first language (Newport & Sapulla, 1987). Helen Neville's research at the Salk Institute's Laboratory for Cognitive Neuroscience also shows that children must learn a language during their first five years or so, before the brain's neural connections are locked in place, or risk permanent linguistic impairment (Wolkomir, 1992). "What suffers is the ability to learn grammar. As children mature, their brain organization becomes increasingly rigid. By puberty, it is largely complete. This spells trouble because most deaf youngsters learn language late; their parents are hearing and do not know ASL, and the children have little or no contact with deaf people when young." (p. 36)

Since it is the grammar of languages that distinguishes them most significantly from one another (most spoken languages have similar pragmatic or social functions and similar sound systems), the early assault on the ability to learn grammar makes the development of a sound language system even more compelling.

Bilingual-bicultural programs differ from other programs most notably by their approach to first language acquisition. While bilingual-bicultural programs have respect for both ASL and English, these programs advocate for ASL to be the first language of children who are deaf. "Research has shown that effective language has to be fast and clear. ASL is an efficient language for visual learning and is easier for Deaf children to acquire as a first language than any form of English" (Finnegan, 1992, p. 7). Johnson, Liddell, Ertling (1989) stated that ASL is the language choice of adults who are deaf, and it offers access to the school curriculum and other world knowledge. A solid foundation in a first language leads to better English performance over time, and skills transfer from one language to another.

eaching ASL as the first language for Deaf children has additional benefits. ASL is the language of Deaf people throughout the United States. Proficiency in ASL automatically allows membership in the Deaf community and in cultural events that occur in communities where Deaf people live. This membership is vital to Deaf children because it promotes a healthy view of who they are as human beings and increases self-esteem and confidence in their abilities to interact in a wide array of situations.

The bilingual-bicultural approach recognizes that ASL and English are two distinct languages in the same way that, for example, French and German are distinct languages. ASL is a complete language with its own grammar, syntax, and rules for interaction. Signing ASL and speaking English cannot be performed simultaneously with a great degree of success; therefore, when signing ASL one should not attempt to speak English. Speaking English when signing deteriorates the visual signal resulting in an inferior production of signs as well as inferior use of spoken English. The goal is clear and proficient production of ASL.

Proponents of the bilingual-bicultural approach believe that Deaf children are not deficient. Instead of being auditory learners, they are visual learners. Deaf children do not need remedial teaching strategies because the bilingual-bicultural program provides a unique visual learning environment in which their linguistic, cultural, and social needs are met. Deaf teachers, administrators, and support staff are considered valuable components of the bilingual-bicultural program. The bilingual-bicultural approach does not support mainstreaming Deaf children in regular education programs. Many Deaf adults have shared their stories of isolation and academic deprivation while attending schools for children who can hear. The bilingual-bicultural approach holds that cognitive, linguistic, and social competence are best achieved in environments that provide full communicative access to the curriculum.

## Who Can Choose a Bilingual-Bicultural Option?

Proponents of the bilingual-bicultural option feel that all children, no matter what their degree of hearing loss, would benefit from a bilingual-bicultural option. However, it is most likely that these programs will exist separate from the mainstream education agencies and buildings. Some may be residential, some may be day schools. Parents or caregivers who feel that this approach is appropriate for their child should call the residential school for Deaf children in their home state. Although a growing number of schools for children who are deaf have adopted bilingual-bicultural programming, families in rural areas may not have access to this approach.

## What Are the Benefits of a Bilingual-Bicultural Option?

There are several benefits of bilingual-bicultural education. Early access to comprehensible language fosters early

cognitive development which, in turn, promotes increased literacy and greater academic achievement. Students who attend bilingual-bicultural programs develop functional skills in two languages. The emphasis on early language acquisition and establishing a first language (ASL) provides a base upon which English is subsequently taught. Students in bilingual-bicultural programs have increased self-esteem and confidence due to the healthy view of Deaf children, acceptance of who they are as human beings, and increased confidence to function in bilingual-bicultural environments.

## What Are the Limitations of a Bilingual-Bicultural Option?

Bilingual-bicultural programs in the United States are still relatively new. Limited data are available regarding students' achievement in these programs. As schools begin bilingual-bicultural programs, schools may have difficulty recruiting native signers of ASL because their numbers are limited. Further, while staff may have excellent skills in signed English, they often do not have proficient ASL skills and must be retrained. Some opposition may result in this effort. At this time, most university education programs continue to prepare teachers of the deaf in the philosophy of Total Communication. Generally, the level of sign language proficiency required by most universities, states, and certifying agencies is inadequate.

Lack of ASL classes for parents or caregivers, especially in rural areas, may severely restrict communication in the home. Without fluent language models, Deaf children's language will be developed neither optimally nor naturally.

## What Are Some Questions to Ask in Choosing a Bilingual-Bicultural Option?

- How many of the educational staff are native ASL signers and/or fluent ASL signers?
- How are signing skills evaluated?
- How is English developed?
- When is English introduced in the curriculum?
- What support is given to parents or caregivers to learn ASL?
- How are children who developed language late or have limited language proficiency treated in this type of program?
- How does the curriculum compare to that of hearing children?
- Where do you recruit staff?
- How will I know if my child is progressing adequately?

## References and Additional Resources


Bicultural Center, 5506 Kenilworth Ave., Suite 105, Riverdale, MD 20737-3106, (301) 277-3945 (V); (301) 277-3944 (TTY).

California School for the Deaf, 30350 Gallaudet Dr., Fremont, CA 94538, (510) 794-3666 (V/TTY).

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